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ABSTRACT

Teachers who are looking for new ways to approach the research paper, and to use cooperative learning in the classroom, can employ the "we-search" paper--a combination of cooperative/collaborative learning and Ken Macrorie's (1988) "I-search" paper. To get started, teachers should: (1) introduce the project and explain its collaborative nature; (2) devise brainstorming techniques for finding a topic; (3) match students by topic choices; (4) provide class time for group meetings; (5) provide a schedule of deadlines for source lists, notes, outlines, rough drafts, and final drafts; (6) discuss the importance of equitable division of labor; and (7) provide evaluation forms so that students can evaluate themselves and the project as a whole. In carrying out the project, instructors may find that some students may not do their share of the work, or that some may disagree on the approach. To counter these problems, teachers can schedule periodic conferences and require weekly reports of individual work. The we-search paper teaches students to work with and learn from others. In addition, teachers have fewer papers to grade, and these papers are of a higher quality. Finally, the we-search method frees up time so that the teacher can help students with deeper research problems and issues. Two appendixes (including a research interests survey form and a sample group evaluation form) and a 32-item suggested readings list are attached. (PRA)

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COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHING THE WE-SEARCH PAPER

Paper Presented at NCTE Spring Conference
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by

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COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHING THE WE-SEARCH PAPER

Every year, students and teachers alike face with dread the prospect of the research paper. Students dread the time spent in the library seeking information and the time spent trying to figure out how to put all the information together. Teachers dread the time they must spend reading and evaluating dry, dull papers laden with errors. Dixie Dellinger (1989) called it "a kind of exquisite torture for student and teacher alike." Others have denounced it as scandalous, useless, and unnecessary.

If no one likes it, why do English teachers continue to require research papers in high school? Most say they need to prepare the college-bound for college research papers; others say that it is required by their school's curriculum. Many, however, are looking for new ways to approach the assignment. Many are also looking for ways to use cooperative learning in the classroom. The solution to both problems is the we-search paper: a combination of cooperative/collaborative learning and Ken Macrorie's (1988) I-Search paper.

Macrorie explains the I-Search paper as a project in which students "deal with something they want intensely." They choose a topic they are really interested in and formulate a question. He suggests that we let the topic find the student.

He explains that in researching the question, students find others interested in the topic for ideas on sources. Then they read all available information, listen to ideas, and interview people. When they interview people, they should ask those people for other sources. He suggests that they talk to (or read)

several experts and then evaluate the experts. A variety of sources are suggested: first-hand and second-hand sources, both print and nonprint. All these elements asre easily adapted to a group assignment.

To keep up with the material as it is collected, students are to keep a daily log. The form of the paper itself is to take four parts: What I knew, Why I am writing this paper, the search, and what I learned. To adapt the log to a group project, individuals could keep the log daily and turn it in to the teacher as evidence that each person participated.

Cooperative learning requires students to work together on a common project; achievement of the goal depends on the learning of each member of the group. According to Johnson and Johnson, four basic elements are needed in effective cooperative learning:

- o positive interdependence
- o face-to-face interaction among students
- o individual accountability
- o interpersonal and small-group skills (pp. 12-13).

They also point out that students should be heterogeneously grouped and that the learning process must be assessed.

Johnson and Johnson also find several advantages to cooperative learning compared to individual or competetive learning including:

- o students are more motivated to learn
- o students have more positive attitudes
- o students are less competitive
- o students are less dependent on the teacher
- o students teach each other

Zemelman and Daniels point out that "one reason research papers usually fail is because the way they are typically assigned is too enormous and detailed for students to absorb at once" (pp. 256-267). Students must be taught the process over a period of years. They give 12 steps from autobiography to

library research: research from inside oneself to the outside world. They make two important points: we must teach research as a process, and we must allow students to teach each other the technical aspects. Slavin (1990) points out that "group investigation" has been recognized by John Dewey and others as a successful method for studying complex subjects.

Explaining the we-search project to students and getting started effectively is crucial to the success of the project. I have outlined below strategies that work for me.

Procedures:

1. Introduce the WE-SEARCH project. Explain that students will be working in groups (or in pairs) with other students who have similar interests. Emphasize that they must choose a question that they really want to answer and that they can adequately research in the community and the library.

2. Devise brainstorming techniques to help students decide what questions they want to research. (A survey is one technique; a sample survey follows)

3. Match students by choices of topics. Try to mix students of different genders, races, and talents whenever possible.

4. Provide some class time for group meetings; many students cannot get together outside of class.

5. Provide a schedule of deadlines for source lists, notes, outlines, rough drafts, and final drafts.

6. Discuss with students the importance of equitable division of the labor. Allow students to work out their own divisions.

7. Provide evaluation forms so that students can evaluate their own contributions to the project and that of the others as well as of the group as a whole.

Possible Problems:

1. Some students may not do their share of the work.
2. Some students may try to dominate their groups.
3. Some students may disagree on how to approach the project.

Possible Solutions:

1. Weekly reports on individual work and on group progress will keep most students on task.
2. Periodic conferences with each group will help the teacher spot conflicts. The students should be counseled on ways to to solve their own conflicts.

There are several benefits for the students in this project:

1. Students do genuine I-Searches while learning to work with others.
2. Students practice true collaborative writing.
3. Students learn from each other, and they learn to help each other.

The obvious benefits for the teacher are fewer papers to grade and fewer basic technique questions to answer, but the greatest benefit is the time that is freed up for helping students with deeper research problems and issues. Also, papers will be of a greater quality.

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Appendix A

RESEARCH INTERESTS SURVEY FORM

Name_____

Which of the following fields interest you most:
(circle up to three)

art	fads	medicine
architecture	fashions	music
business	food	nature
careers	law	politics
cars	literature	religion
education	local history	science
		technology

(you may add your own fields to the list)

Write your first choice from above on the line below:

_____

Think about this topic and write below several facts that you already know about it.

Now consider this topic and write three rather specific questions that you would really like to have answered.

1.

2.

3.

Appendix B

SAMPLE GROUP EVALUATION FORM FOR WE-SEARCH PROJECT

Name_____

Topic_____

List below tasks that you did for the project:

List below any tasks that you promised to do but did not complete:

Rate the other members of your group by amount and quality of work:

0 1 2 3

Name_____

0 1 2 3

Name_____

How did your group work as a whole?
Answer yes or no to each question:

_____1. The work was divided evenly.

_____2. Each person did his share of the work.

_____3. Disagreements were settled fairly.

_____4. No one tried to dominate the group.

Write any specific comments about your group below or on the back:

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